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ABSTRACT

The Florida State Legislature and the Department of Education have generally addressed the 1997 recommendations of the Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability (OPPAGA) for improving student performance in high-poverty schools. Recent legislation and department actions have established a stronger foundation for ensuring that all students perform to the best of their abilities. The state's school grading system now has a component that addresses the achievement of low-performing students, and student performance must now be considered in the annual performance evaluations of teachers and principals. Further, the need for parental involvement in their children's education is now addressed in teacher certification. However, the state has not yet established measurable performance standards for parent involvement. The department's Office of Family Involvement should work with the school districts to develop district indicators that measure parental involvement in the schools. An appendix contains the Florida public school grading criteria for 1998-1999. (SLD)

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Progress Report

August 2000

Report No. 00-07

Florida Actions Should Improve Student Performance in High-Poverty Schools

at a glance

The Legislature and the Department of Education have generally addressed our 1997 recommendations for improving student performance in high-poverty schools. Recent legislation and department actions established a stronger foundation for assuring that all students perform to the best of their abilities.

The state's school grading system has a component that addresses the achievement of low-performing students, and student performance must now be considered in annual performance evaluations of teachers and principals. Further, the need for parental involvement in their children's education is now addressed in teacher certification. However, the state has not yet established measurable performance standards for parental involvement. The department's Office of Family Involvement should work with the school districts to develop district indicators that measure parental involvement in the schools.

Purpose

In accordance with state law, this progress report informs the Legislature of actions taken by the Department of Education in response to a 1997 OPPAGA report.[1,2] The report also provides updated information on the performance of high-poverty schools.

Background

Schools that serve a large percentage of children from low-income families face challenges to improve student performance and meet the goals of Florida's school accountability system. These high-poverty schools generally have significantly lower student test scores than schools serving students from more affluent families.[3] Almost half (48.7%) of Florida's 2,444 public schools that received school performance grades for the 1998-99 school year can be classified as high-poverty schools.

Florida's School Accountability System

Florida's system of school improvement and accountability evaluates progress toward state goals through assessments that compare student performance against the Sunshine State Standards. These standards are a set of benchmarks for every subject and grade level, which all students are expected to meet.

This system began in 1991 when the Legislature enacted Blueprint 2000. This plan set goals for student improvement and was designed to decentralize education and place the majority of the responsibility for educating children on the schools, teachers, and parents.

[1] Section 11.45(7)(f), *F.S.*

[2] *Improving Student Performance in High-poverty Schools,* OPPAGA Report No. 96-86, June 1997.

[3] For purposes of this report, a school is designated as a high-poverty school if 50% or more of its students qualify for free or reduced-priced lunch. This is a conservative estimate as not all students who are eligible apply for free and reduced-priced lunch. This is particularly true in middle and high schools.

Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability
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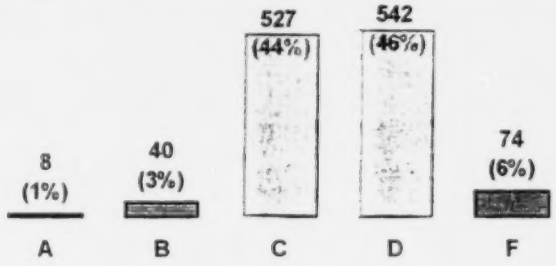
Florida uses the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) to measure student progress towards the Sunshine State Standards. These tests measure student performance in reading, writing, and math. FCAT results are used to measure not only the student's progress, but also the performance of the school, school district, and state.

The results of these tests along with additional information are used to assign letter grades (A through F) to public schools. Schools must show improvement in student test scores to improve their grades. For the 1998-99 school year, schools whose reading, writing, and math scores met or exceeded higher performing criteria, along with some additional criteria such as demonstrating substantial improvement in reading scores of the lowest achieving students, received an A. Schools whose reading, writing, and math scores are below minimum criteria receive an F. State Board of Education rule requires the Commissioner of Education and the school board of the F school to take extra steps to ensure improved student performance. For a description of the school-grading rule see Appendix A.

Performance of High-Poverty Schools

High-poverty schools typically lag behind other Florida schools on state student performance assessments. As shown in Exhibit 1, during the 1998-99 school year most high-poverty schools (1,069 or 90%) received grades of C or D. [4] Of the schools that received school performance grades for the 1998-99 school year, 74 of the 78 schools (95%) that received the lowest performance grade of F were high-poverty schools. [5]

Exhibit 1
Most High-Poverty Schools Received a Grade of C or D in 1998-99



Source: Department of Education.

Prior Findings

In 1996, the Joint Legislative Auditing Committee, at the request of the House Education Committee, directed OPPAGA to examine how school systems can work to improve performance. OPPAGA's June 1997, review focused on schools that serve a large percentage of children from low-income families. Our report addressed four questions.

- How do the performance, resources, and challenges of high-poverty schools compare to those of low-poverty schools?
- Can high-poverty schools improve student performance by setting high academic expectations for all students?
- What are the barriers to securing parental involvement in high-poverty schools?
- Can principals in high-poverty schools make a difference in improving student performance?

OPPAGA found that schools serving a large percentage of children from low-income families had significantly lower student test scores than schools serving a small percentage of these students. Although high-poverty schools received more resources per student, they faced greater challenges to improving student performance. These challenges included high student mobility, absenteeism, and disciplinary problems.

We noted that a critical step to improving student academic performance in high-poverty schools was implementing high expectations for all students. In addition, school principals who

[4] High-poverty schools data for 1999-2000 will not be available until after the 1999-2000 school-grade appeals process is completed in September 2000.

[5] Data received before the school-grade appeals process shows that 4 schools statewide received a performance grade of F for the 1999-2000 school year and that none of the 78 schools that had a grade of F in the 1998-99 school year received an F in 1999-2000.

exhibited strong leadership behaviors and consistently focused on improving student performance could make a difference in the performance of their schools.

Our report also concluded that due to limitations of time, financial resources, and educational skills, low-income parents often had difficulty becoming active partners in their children's education. Although some high-poverty schools had implemented strategies to involve parents, limited parental involvement was still a major obstacle to improved student performance.

Current Status

The Florida Legislature and the Department of Education acted upon three of the four recommendations in our 1997 report.

The Department of Education should work with school districts to develop in-service training programs for principals and teachers that stress the importance of setting high student expectations. This recommendation has been addressed. The Educate 2000 plan, enacted by the 2000 Legislature, requires school districts to establish individual professional development plans for each instructional employee as part of their professional development systems.[5] These plans must be related to student performance data of the students that are assigned to the teacher and must also include an evaluation component. In addition, the department's Area Centers for Educational Enhancement provide in-service training to principals and teachers on standards, assessment, and instruction that focus on high expectations for all students.

The Department of Education should modify teacher certification and professional development requirements to ensure that teachers are trained in the importance and effects of establishing high expectations and increasing parental involvement. This recommendation has been addressed. The department was directed by the 1999 Legislature in the A+ Plan to study Florida's certification process. The department presented its findings to the State Board of Education in January 2000. This report was one factor in creating the Educate 2000 plan. This legislation made many changes to the certification process to increase student performance for all students. It requires teachers to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the value of and strategies for promoting parental involvement. In addition, the Education Standards Commission developed Educator Accomplished Practices for the Twenty-First Century, which reference communication and facilitation skills in working with families.

The Legislature and the department should require school districts to include student performance in the criteria for evaluating principals. The A+ plan requires school districts to include student performance in their principal performance appraisal systems. In addition, districts must adopt and implement a performance pay policy effective July 1, 2002, that is partially based on the students' performance at the principals' schools.

The state should establish performance standards for parental involvement and school districts should collect and report this information. This recommendation has not been fully addressed. The 1999 Legislature established a performance budgeting measure on the number and percentage of schools that had an active Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) or Parent Teacher Association (PTA). However, this measure was not included in the Fiscal Year 2000-01 budget implementing bill as legislators focused the performance budgeting measures on student performance.

The Department of Education reorganized in January 2000 and established a new Office of Family Involvement. This office provides resources, training, and technical assistance for parents, schools, and communities to support families in making choices that will promote a high quality education for their children in both public and private settings. This office should work with school districts and consult with OPPAGA to develop district indicators to measure parental involvement in the schools. Such measures could include the number and type of parental outreach programs schools implement, attendance rates at parent-teacher conferences, and the number of hours parents work in volunteer activities.

[5] Chapter 2000-301, *Laws of Florida.*

Appendix A
Florida Public-School Grading Criteria 1998-99

Grade A

- The school meets grade "B" criteria.
- The percentage of students absent more than 20 days, percentage of students suspended out of school, and the dropout rate (high schools) are below state averages.
- The school demonstrates substantial improvement in reading scores. [1]
- The school demonstrates no substantial decline in math or writing scores. [2]
- At least 95% of the standard curriculum students are tested.

[1] Substantial improvement in reading means more than 2% increase in students scoring in FCAT Level 3 and above.
[2] Substantial decline means 5% or more decline in students scoring in FCAT Level 3 and above in math or in Florida Writes!

Grade B

- Current year reading, writing and math data are at or above higher performing criteria.
- No subgroup data are below minimum criteria. [1]
- At least 90% of the standard curriculum students are tested. [2]

[1] Subgroups include economically disadvantaged, Black, White, Hispanic, Asian, and American Indian students.
[2] Standard curriculum students also include language impaired, gifted, hospital homebound, and limited English proficient students who have been in an ESOL program more than two years.

Grade C

Current year reading, writing and math data are at or above minimum criteria.

Grade D

Current year reading or writing or math data are below minimum criteria.

Grade F

Current year reading, writing and math data are below minimum criteria.

FCAT (Criteria for elementary, middle, and high school)

Grade	*Reading*	*Math*
A and B	50% score Level 3 and above	50% score Level 3 and above
C, D, and F	60% score Level 2 and above	60% score Level 2 and above

Florida Writes!

Grade	*Elementary*	*Middle*	*High*
A and B	67% score Level 3 and above	75% score Level 3 and above	80% score Level 3 and above
C, D, and F	50% score Level 3 and above	50% score Level 3 and above	75% score Level 3 and above

Source: Department of Education.

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